Chapter 9

From elitist to inclusive higher education

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Introduction

In the United Kingdom and internationally there is a continuing drive to widen participation in university education, to include greater numbers of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and 'under-represented' groups. This has been interpreted in terms of social divisions relating to social class, gender and ethnicity and more recently, disability. Looking at evidence from the UK about recruitment, retention, and degree attainment in relation to these various equality strands we see that, despite the mass expansion of UK higher education (HE), differential patterns of access and outcome remain.

Numerous interventions are aimed at addressing various aspects of this inequality, including the provision of support for students thought to be at risk of underachievement. Whether support is universal/mainstream (available to any student) or targeted at specific groups, has very real implications for students' identity and their experience of an inclusive ethos. Furthermore, many consider there are tensions between the provision of support and the need to maintain academic standards.

Higher education is widely regarded not only as a societal good, but increasingly it is viewed in terms of the range of benefits it confers on the individual. It can be seen as enhancing social mobility and as a means to social inclusion because of its power to enhance life chances for socially disadvantaged groups (Hinton-Smith 2012). But who has benefitted most from the transformation of UK HE from an "elite to a mass system" (Riddell et al., 2005:157) catering for a diverse student population? And to what extent are universities now fully inclusive environments, where all individuals, with their unique and multi-faceted identity, strengths and needs, will learn and develop, and contribute to the diversity of the student population?

Task

Look around your campus and classes and observe: what proportion of students is from an ethnic minority? How many are mature students? What is the balance between the genders?

How many have disabilities? Take care about judging by appearances of course: not all differences are visible. Ask your friends doing other courses or attending other institutions the same questions. How diverse is the student population on your course and how does this compare to other courses and other institutions? In your opinion, to what extent is our current HE provision still an elite one, or an inclusive one? Why?

The context of higher education

'Twenty-one Oxbridge colleges took no black students last year.'
So said Jeevan Vasagar, writing for The Guardian in 2010, suggesting the possibility of racism within Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Of course the situation is much more complex than the headline suggests but it highlights the emotive nature of issues to do with access to universities. Issues extend to possible sexism too, understandably, considering that Oxford and Cambridge did not formally award degrees to women until 1920 and 1947 respectively. The tendency for non-traditional students to go to newer, less prestigious universities, rather than accessing the elite institutions of Oxbridge and other older universities (discussed further below) has also fuelled concerns about inequality. Such concerns are based on the assumption that HE benefits individuals in terms of enabling higher earnings, intellectual development, personal growth, access to social networks (Riddell et al, 2005) and so on. We then need to ask 'Are these benefits equally available to disadvantaged/under-represented groups?' Or in other words, is HE fully inclusive?

Discussion
What are the benefits and challenges of a diverse and inclusive HE system…for you as an individual HE student?....for HE institutions?....for the economy and for society in general?

The concept of inclusive education is usually applied to compulsory educational provision, where it is concerned with the "presence, participation and achievement" (Ainscow and Dyson, 2006:25) of all children and young people. But entry to HE has always been, and remains, selective: it is only accessible to those with *the right qualifications*. It is therefore competitive, unlike most education up to this point which is accessible to all. Nevertheless there is growing support for more inclusive higher education provision, based on equality for

all members of a diverse population of learners. This diversity has arisen from huge changes in the HE sector in recent decades.

With the transition from traditional manufacturing to knowledge-based economies comes an increase in the demand for a differently educated workforce. As a result, there has been a massive expansion of HE over the last 30 years worldwide with close to 50 per cent of young people in England now going to university (BIS/ONS, 2013). So participation has widened beyond the narrow preserve of middle and upper class males, as was originally the case in European universities. But the incorporation of groups of students who have traditionally been less likely to go into HE has not proved straightforward, and the need for active facilitation to promote their full inclusion has given rise to the Widening Participation (WP) agenda. WP refers to the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education. Concerns about social class and socio-economic disadvantage have tended to dominate discussions of WP, but the concept has also encompassed other under-represented groups: those who have no history of HE participation in their families, women, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, mature students and those who have been 'looked after children'. Disability is not always encompassed in conceptions of WP but is increasingly regarded as an equal opportunities issue alongside gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity and age. Where disability has traditionally been seen as a medical problem or deficit associated with the individual (the 'medical model' of disability) it is increasingly being viewed from the 'social model' viewpoint in which society is regarded as creating the disabling barriers experienced by the individual (See chapter xx). From this perspective disability then becomes a matter of equality. Of course, the multi-faceted nature of identity means that any individual will belong to various groups; this makes for a very complex picture indeed when trying to get to grips with this field.

Discussions of inequality in HE frequently draw on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital: differences in cultural capital (social connections, experiences and knowledge) are regarded as accounting for social class differences in HE participation and attainment, and the distribution of students between elite and other institutions. So for example, a working class potential student may in effect be excluded because they feel as though they wouldn't fit in or belong at university; their cultural capital has not equipped them with the skills and information necessary to gain entry to and succeed in HE. Interestingly, recent research now indicates that the strongest influence of cultural capital is *indirect*, through its effects on school attainment

(and hence entry qualifications), rather than *directly* through social class (Noble and Davies, 2009). In other words, a pupil from a working class background finds that their own cultural capital does not fit well with that of the school, and they are therefore at a disadvantage. And as noted above, without the right entry qualifications, you cannot get into university.

So a HE system designed originally for the privileged minority of white, male middle/upper class non-disabled students is now expected to cope with a much more diverse student population. Another contributor to the diversification of the HE student population in recent years is the increasing numbers of international students travelling to the UK to study, resulting in universities now being multi-cultural communities. Caruana and Ploner (2010) suggest that two differing agendas - equality and diversity on the one hand, and internationalisation on the other - are in tension. The driver for promoting internationalisation is largely financial: UK HE is big business and institutions may consider that attracting international students will enhance its prestige. The underpinnings of equality and diversity, however, are ethical: the case for inclusion of a diverse population is a matter of social justice. A commitment to fairness and social justice would suggest that universities have a responsibility not only to allow access to this newly diverse population but to meet their complex and differing needs rather than merely assimilate them into the existing system.

Legal requirements of equality of opportunity continue to be refined and strengthened. For example, in the UK the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (2005) placed on all public institutions a duty to actively promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. This obligation includes making reasonable adjustments "to policies, provisions or the physical environment in order to overcome a disadvantage suffered by a disabled student" (Rickinson, 2010:4). More broadly, the subsequent Equality Act of 2010 has encompassed and strengthened numerous pre-existing pieces of equality legislation and makes it illegal to discriminate against any student or potential student because of any of the nine 'protected characteristics', including those of Disability, Age, Race, and Sex. Specific to HE, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was set up "to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006-07". It operates primarily through the monitoring of 'access agreements' which set out what HE institutions intend to do to promote access, such as outreach work and summer schools.

Having provided a little historical and contemporary context regarding HE, the next three sections take Ainscow and Dyson's (2006) three aspects of inclusion in education - presence, participation and achievement – and apply these to HE.

'Presence': Who gets into university?

Increasing numbers of (especially young) people are entering HE and the student population has become more diverse. However, above we questioned whether all groups of society have benefitted equally from this expansion. But what is the evidence of inequality in access? The term 'under-represented groups' was used above, as if this is an unproblematic concept. In fact, considerable debate has surrounded which groups of society are under-represented in HE. Are you more or less likely to go to university if you are male or female? From a particular ethnic group or social class or are disabled? Who counts as 'disadvantaged'? What proportion of HE students is identified as such and how does this compare with the population as a whole? Given that the student population is not representative of the population as a whole (they are more likely to be young, for example) is this a fair comparison? Below we consider several groups in turn, looking at the evidence regarding their representation at university.

Socio-economic status

The Sutton Trust (2008) stated that "Forty-three per cent of young people from the higher social classes participate in higher education, compared with 19 per cent of those from the bottom social classes." McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007) confirm that students from lower socio-economic groups are still less likely to participate in higher education than those from more advantaged groups. Partly this is because students from poor backgrounds are less likely to achieve good enough entry qualifications. As Gorard (2008) points out, "these prior qualifications are strongly associated with social class and, to a lesser extent, with ethnicity, disability and sex". But it is worth noting that students with the same entry qualifications have the same chance of being in a position to apply to university regardless of their background. Another possible factor is that selection and interview processes may be biased in favour of those with the right cultural capital (i.e. middle class students).

Gender

While the historic picture of unequal access regarding social class clearly still exists despite having shown some improvement, the picture is different regarding gender. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014) reports that "A higher proportion of female students (56.2%) than male students (43.8%) were studying in HE in the UK" in 2012/13. So males could now be regarded as under-represented in HE- a stark contrast with the exclusively male early higher education institutions.

Of course the simple statistics hide greater complexity, such as the tendency for certain subject areas to attract a majority of one gender or the other; the implications of this for later employment prospects is discussed below.

Ethnicity

If we look at statistics regarding ethnicity, the picture is complex.

Task
Look at the table below; what do the statistics tell you? And, perhaps more importantly, what don't they tell you? Does this offer evidence of under-representation?

Starting year	White	Minority ethnic	Unknown	Total	Minority ethnic
1996-97	144,625	18,335	9,540	172,495	11%
1997-98	155,245	21,555	10,945	187,745	12%
1998-99	153,305	22,385	11,545	187,235	13%
1999-00	157,925	23,775	7,760	189,465	13%
2000-01	159,585	26,390	6,885	192,860	14%
2001-02	163,375	28,310	8,385	200,065	15%
2002-03	**171,965**	**30,095**	**5,655**	**207,715**	**15%**
2003-04	173,025	31,945	6,750	211,720	16%
2004-05	176,775	34,545	4,340	215,655	16%
2005-06	190,260	38,360	4,815	233,435	17%
2006-07	180,200	39,295	3,970	223,470	18%

Table 1 Number of young UK students starting in HE 1996-97 to 2005-06 (HEFCE 2010**:**8)

The upward trend in participation in HE of BME students is clear and Modood (2012:19) indicates that 'by 2008, non-whites constituted 20% of HE places offered to new students, this being almost double their share of the population' (but remember some BME students travel from overseas to attend UK universities). However, the statistics mask complex issues. There are considerable disparities between specific ethnic groups in terms of participation rates, patterns of study (e.g. full/part time, under/postgraduate) and degree attainment. In other words, regarding "minority ethnic" students as a homogeneous group (as in table 1 from HEFCE) can mask much of the disadvantage which is evident when we identify groups' specific ethnic origins. Furthermore, BME students are still more concentrated in the (typically less prestigious) newer universities. Modood claims there is evidence of institutional discrimination on the part of pre-1992 universities, whose BME applicants have to perform better in order to secure a place. So there remain important issues regarding fair access in relation to ethnicity.

Disability

Gosling (2009:127 in Rickinson 2010:4) describes the current situation within the sector as follows:

> Students with disabilities are under-represented in higher education. The reasons for this may be to do with underachievement and low aspiration as children at school, but may have as much to do with their social class, or their ethnicity or a combination of these factors. But we cannot rule out the possibility that prejudice against disabled students and ignorance about what they are capable of, with appropriate support, has also contributed to their under-representation.

This highlights the complex interplay of factors. Added to this is the difficulty with simply counting the number of disabled students. Not all 'disabled' students will have disclosed their disability to their institution or be claiming Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) - the two key ways of identifying such students. According to the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2013, p98) "Over the last nine years, the proportion of students who were disabled steadily increased from 5.4% in 2003/04 to 8.6% in 2011/12"; but is this evidence of continuing under-representation? Take a moment to think about the age profile of the university

population: they are mostly young, whereas within the population as a whole, disability is much more common amongst elderly people. And as with ethnicity and gender, these figures also vary considerably by subject area: “The proportion of students within a subject area who were disabled ranged from 15.7% of those studying creative arts and design to 4.9% of those studying business and administrative studies” (ECU, 2013, p95). We will see below how this has major implications for subsequent earning potential.

The examples above (social class, gender, ethnicity and disability) show how evidence of under-representation is complex and sometimes contradictory. Indeed, some have questioned the whole assumption underlying the widening participation agenda, which is “that potential students are unfairly and disproportionately denied access to higher education in terms of occupation, ethnicity, sex or disability” (Gorard, 2008 p436). Gorard goes on to say “the two groups most obviously under-represented in HE at present – males and whites – have been largely ignored in concerns about WP.” One thing that is clear is the uneven spread of non-traditional students across the HE sector; they are concentrated in (less prestigious) newer institutions which emphasise teaching, with relatively lesser growth in numbers in elite institutions which tend to be more research intensive. Hinton-Smith (2012) identifies processes of ‘self-selection’ by non-traditional students favouring non-elite institutions, because of their financial concerns, and also issues to do with culture and identity; non-traditional students may perceive elite institutions as not providing an environment they would comfortably fit into, in contrast to a more welcoming culture in newer universities which they recognise as more ‘for people like me’ (see discussion of cultural capital above). Hinton-Smith also accuses some institutions of discriminatory admissions processes, in which elite universities favour applicants who hold traditional entry qualifications (A levels).

‘Participation’: What happens once they get there?

Once a student has been offered a place at university, what happens next? Some groups of non-traditional students show concerningly low retention rates; in other words, a lot drop out during their studies. For example, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation draws attention to ‘The disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged family backgrounds who prematurely discontinue their careers in higher education’ (Forsyth and Furlong 2003:2). There are also disparities between ethnic groups; Thomas and Berry (using data from the National Audit Office, 2007) state "BME full-time students (with the exception of mixed race

and ‘other’ ethnicities), are more likely to continue into their second year of study than White students" (2010:14). With financial pressure on institutions to retain as many of their students as possible universities are keen to understand the experiences of various groups of students. The case study below briefly reports on unpublished research carried out at the University of Wolverhampton, which invited disabled students to discuss their experiences of support in terms of barriers and enablers to their learning.

All students were invited to participate in the survey if they felt they had additional needs (related to a physical, mental, sensory impairment or health condition or a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia) - whether or not they had disclosed these to the institution.

Case study: disabled students’ experiences of barriers and enablers to their learning

Some students underlined how crucial additional support was to their success in HE:

> “In my First and Second year my personal tutors were amazing constantly checking to see if there was anything that they could improve or help me with to increase my learning”

A wide range of ‘reasonable adjustments’ (such as ‘considerate marking’ for dyslexic students) were reported to be used by students, although some had not come forward to access support. There was a variety of views expressed about whether to disclose a disability; for example:

> “Anxiety about being told I'm wrong, due to lack of medical attention I have had”
>
> “I had the opportunity to declare, so I declared everything, there was no point me not declaring anything because it wouldn’t benefit me if I didn’t lay my cards on the table”
>
> “Not something I want people to be aware of on a formal basis”
>
> “It would depend on the need as some of my illness I have disclosed to the University and other I haven't”

Some students felt the implementation of adjustments was inconsistent, and attitudes seemed crucial to this. One individual stated:

> “You can get left out by students and staff, it’s like you can get brushed aside”

Unfortunately, such attitudinal and cultural barriers are well documented in published literature (e.g. Riddell et al, 2004) and this data reinforces the continuing need to actively promote an inclusive institutional ethos regarding disability.

Discussion

A significant proportion of respondents in this survey had not disclosed their disability to the university. What factors might an individual student consider when deciding whether to do so? What could be done to encourage disclosure?

'Achievement': Students' degree attainment

As a student completes their time at University, we turn next to attainment and specifically the 'attainment gap'. This term refers to any persistent discrepancy of outcome (indicated by such indicators as degree classification or subsequent employment), between different groups of students (such as working or middle class students; white or BME students). The closing of any such attainment gaps is a priority for those concerned with equity in education. The following headline grabbers from the Equality Challenge Unit's 2013 report would suggest there is indeed some cause for concern:

8.6 per cent ethnicity degree attainment gap for younger students

26.3 per cent ethnicity degree attainment gap for older students

Task

Look at the three tables of data below from the HEFCE report *Higher education and beyond: Outcomes from full-time first degree study* (2013). Which statistics do you think give most cause for concern? Can you spot any examples of a 'negative attainment gap' (see below for an explanation of this)?

	White	Black	Chinese	Indian	Other Asian	Other / unknown
Starting cohort	181,510	8,465	2,410	10,325	10,835	12,215
Degree-qualified	**83.1%**	**73.8%**	**87.2%**	**84.1%**	**77.7%**	**78.4%**
First or upper second	**56.1%**	**31.3%**	**50.7%**	**45.8%**	**35.9%**	**49.2%**
Degree & employed or studying	**72.8%**	**60.5%**	**68.6%**	**70.3%**	**62.3%**	**65.7%**
Degree & graduate job or study	**48.4%**	**37.7%**	**53.2%**	**51.1%**	**42.6%**	**46.2%**

Table 7 Total cohort and percentage of the cohort who achieved each outcome, split by ethnicity (HEFCE 2013)

	Women	**Men**
Starting cohort	123,450	102,315
Degree-qualified	**84.9%**	**79.2%**
First or upper second	**57.0%**	**48.9%**
Degree & employed or studying	**75.4%**	**66.6%**
Degree & graduate job or study	**49.0%**	**46.4%**

Table 6 Total number of female and male students, and the percentage of the cohorts who achieved each outcome (HEFCE 2013)

	Disabled students allowance	Declared disability	Not known to be disabled
Starting cohort	6,785	9,670	209,310
Degree-qualified	**82.8%**	**79.5%**	**82.5%**
First or upper second	**50.6%**	**49.5%**	**53.6%**
Degree-qualified and employed or studying	**69.4%**	**67.2%**	**71.7%**
Degree & graduate job or study	**46.8%**	**45.8%**	**47.9%**

Table 8 Total cohort and percentage of the cohort who achieved each outcome, split by disability status (HEFCE 2013)

The last table, relating to disability status demonstrates that disabled students receiving DSA perform better than disabled students who don't receive Disabled Students' Allowances and (perhaps surprisingly) better than those students who are **not** known to be disabled. This is one of several examples above of a negative attainment gap (ECU 2013) - in which a potentially disadvantaged group tend to out-perform others; but it is worth pointing out that this slender overall advantage masks significant differences in some subject areas. For example, ECU (2013) reports that in medicine and dentistry 23.6% of disabled qualifiers received a first, compared with 32.0% of non-disabled qualifiers (an 8.4 percentage points difference).

Similarly the overall favourable outcomes for women compared to men disguise differences according to subject area. More women complete less prestigious degree programmes in the arts and humanities, which tend to lead to less stable employment and much lower pay, compared to the male dominated subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics where salaries may be 60-90% higher and employment rates more stable.

What has been done to improve equity?

So far in this chapter we have seen that there are a complex range of possible reasons accounting for patterns of differential access to HE and subsequent outcomes. In published

literature, most attention has been paid to socio-economically disadvantaged students, and Forsyth and Furlong (2003) identify the following barriers to HE:

- Lack of familiarity with how universities work, subjects, study methods and student finance policies
- Lack of good advice and careers information
- Low aspirations within their schools and neighbourhoods
- Fear of debt (more so than actual debt)
- Cultural barriers, with HE being an 'alien concept' for families and friends
- Trouble fitting in to the institutional life, especially of more prestigious institutions

Many of these factors are relevant to students who identify with other under-represented groups too. For example: socio-economic disadvantage is more common among some BME groups, single parents, mature students and disabled students.

Task

Working in a small group, generate ideas for what could be done to address these issues. Some of your strategies may be targeted, some may be universal (see below). Consider how much your strategies might cost and who should pay. Anticipate criticisms from other groups of stakeholders e.g. middle class families, and how you will respond to their points.

Interventions which aim to address inequality in HE can be directed at two stages in a student's career:

1. Action can aim to raise students' early educational attainment (hence HE entry qualifications) and aspiration so they are better prepared and more likely to apply for and gain admission to HE. There is strong evidence to suggest that raising the school attainment of these young people is likely to have a more powerful effect than later interventions (Noble and Davies 2009). Gorard (2008 p436) claims that there 'is no simple and consistent pattern of under-representation among socially disadvantaged groups in attendance on HE courses, *once prior qualifications for entry are taken into account*…This, in turn, suggests that WP activities need to be directed at the earlier life of potential students more than at the point of possible transfer to HE.' This makes a strong case for outreach activity in schools.

2. Action may attempt to change the way HE institutions recruit and support students from non-traditional backgrounds once there, to maximise their chances of completing their studies (retention) and achieving highly. For example, international students and those who come under the widening participation umbrella may benefit from orientation programmes to help them adjust to the unfamiliar HE environment while maintaining their sense of identity. Similarly, Foundation degrees and bursaries which provide financial support for many less well-off students might effectively address recruitment, retention and achievement.

Intervention can also be either *targeted* at individuals/groups of students, or *universally available* (to all students). While targeted intervention may seem to provide best use of resources, there is now a growing move towards making higher education more inclusive for *all* students, building on students' identities and cultural backgrounds and individual knowledge (Caruana and Ploner, 2010). Funded targeted intervention projects are notoriously prone to fluctuations in funding and government policy, making it hard to track long term effectiveness of programmes. An example of one such programme is Aimhigher, which closed in 2011; it "aimed to widen participation and access in higher education (HE) by raising awareness, aspirations and attainment among learners from under-represented groups. […] The programme particularly focused on children in school from lower socio-economic groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who lived in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE was low." McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007) indicate that Aimhigher made a positive difference "in raising educational attainment and raising aspirations and awareness of HE among underrepresented groups"; and yet the authors remain critical. They suggest that initiatives such as Aimhigher, while promoting the WP of under-represented groups in HE nevertheless do little to address issues of social justice. Instead of targeting students in most need of additional support (e.g. white working class students), they often target easier to reach groups (such as BME students as a whole, rather than the specific ethnic groups which are under-represented) who will more readily enable government participation targets to be reached.

For disabled students also, changes to funding arrangements are planned. Disabled Students' Allowances are highly targeted government grants which help meet the extra costs faced by students as a result of a disability or specific learning difficulty. Forthcoming reductions in DSA will put greater financial responsibilities on individual HE institutions to ensure their

disabled students are able to participate on an equal basis with other students. Unsurprisingly this is raising concerns about whether universities will indeed 'pick up the tab', although ideologically this move would appear to support an inclusive ethos. This is because it will create incentives for universities to work towards more mainstream practices that are fully inclusive, resulting in a situation where DSA funding (in theory) is no longer needed. This more fully inclusive environment should address staff concerns over fairness (identified by Riddell et al 2005) arising from many students e.g. international students, or those from working class backgrounds being recognised as having needs and yet not 'qualifying' for additional help.

How can academic standards be maintained?

As the proportion of people going to university is increasing, entry qualifications have dropped, and honours degree classifications have risen (Yorke, 2012). This gives rise to the common perception of 'dumbing down' or the lowering of academic standards. This is often linked to assumptions about certain groups of students lacking the necessary skills and capital to succeed in HE, and therefore needing additional resources (Hockings 2010). This deficit view of 'non-traditional' students (which emphasises and labels them according to what they cannot do, rather than what they can) is widely held but also contested by many, who argue there is no evidence of a drop in academic standards as a result of widening participation. Changing curriculum and assessment practices that recognise a wider range of skills, and a new emphasis on employability (Yorke, 2012) are some of the factors helping to maintain academic standards, but as we have seen above, much progress is yet to be made before success in higher education can be said to be equally within reach of all groups.

Discussion

Simplistic assumptions about non-traditional students being deficient in skills and abilities ('deficit model' thinking) can be damaging for individuals; what can be done to promote more positive images?

Do you think that requirements to widen participation in HE have led to the 'dumbing down' of standards or reduction of academic rigour?

Conclusion

A fully inclusive university is one where all individuals, with their unique and multi-faceted identity, strengths and needs, will learn and develop, and contribute to the diversity of the

student population. In the evolution away from an elite, to a more inclusive system of HE, May and Bridger (2010:2 in Rickinson, 2010) have observed an ongoing 'shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement'.

Despite significant progress towards more inclusive higher education there remains much to be done, and widening access to HE continues to be high on the agenda in many countries. Recent global recession has threatened this however, with many countries cutting education budgets; this has had a disproportionate effect (according to many critics) on underprivileged students (Hinton-Smith 2012) whose fear of debt incurred by university acts as a disincentive for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. In contrast, the Office of Fair Access claims that "The introduction of higher fees in 2006-07 has not had a detrimental effect on participation of students from low income and other under-represented groups." Whatever your own view there is a clear tension in current UK policy regarding student tuition fees and the WP agenda- a tension that is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

Task

Research your own higher education institution's mission statement and policies and provision regarding widening participation and equality. How do they reflect current legislation and theories of equality, diversity and inclusion?

Summary points

- Historically access to university was reserved for a narrow elite of the population (white, male, middle/upper class)
- Nowadays arguments based on equality of opportunity form the basis of the widening participation agenda for all sectors of the population
- Almost half of young people in the UK now attend university and many are from groups have been traditionally less likely to attend university ('under-represented' groups)
- These groups relate to characteristics such as socio-economic status and social class, gender, age, ethnicity and disability.

- Despite significant progress towards a fully inclusive system, there remain differences in access to HE and in degree attainment, and progression into careers and jobs.

- Disagreement remains about how to address this inequality; increasingly issues of equity and inclusive practice are being embedded in all higher education functions.

Recommended reading

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